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The urge to drown

Matthew Michael Loftin

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The urge to drown

by

Matthew Michael Loftin

**A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS**

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Sheryl St. Germain

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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These poems are about intimacy, for the most part. A high school psychologist once told me that I needed to understand and appreciate intimate relationships in order to be happy. For some reason I always felt blocked from intimate situations; I always wondered about what the other person was thinking. I think that these poems show that stretch of imagination, although they recognize at the same time a human inability to fully understand the situation-at-hand.

While writing this manuscript, I came to the conclusion that the achievement of intimacy with another required a Zen-like participation in the moment. Simply put, if one does not think about the intimate moment, one will achieve intimacy within the moment. Quite a few of my poems explore points where intimacy is broken because of individual designs on the situation. Just about every character in these poems, including my various speakers, has an agenda that prevents them from achieving intimacy in the moment.

I have structured the manuscript in such a way as to provide a profile or model of my quest for intimacy. Intimacy became more for me than a relationship issue. I began to wonder about intimacy with myself. The Dream poems are an exploration of the Self, placed according to their import to the "waking" (non-dream) poems. Some of the poems attempt to portray a state of mind between fully-woken and dreaming. In order to show all sides of the profile, I feel that the inclusion of these states of mind is essential. Dreams, the waking world, and all parts between have equal import to an individual's emotional state of being. Jung has built an entire branch of psychology based on this assumption.

The "Limbs" series is not intended to function by itself as a whole. Without the context of their surrounding poems, the "Limbs" pages do not carry much independent meaning. I created the "Limbs" by pulling parts from poems that did not make it into this manuscript. They represent other thoughts on intimacy, both with Self and others. They are meant to provide bridges between sections of my book. The sections are not really sections, in the traditional sense. I did not want to interrupt the manuscript with blank, numbered pages. The pages that just read, "Limbs" are an attempt to

provide a section break without completely dissolving continuity. Many of them are images or snippets that, without the surrounding poems, would lack contextual meaning. I derived the title "Limbs" from the secondary theme of self-dismemberment that runs through the work. As such, the word "Limbs" contributes to the work much more than, say, a large roman numeral on an otherwise blank page.

The final section, the Pastor-centered series, was originally meant to be a much larger. After writing the other poems for this manuscript, I felt that the Pastor series concerned itself with the same issue of intimacy, although in a religious context. It doesn't really belong with the other poems; placing it anywhere but the end would defeat the general mood of the work. It occupies the last space in my manuscript with the hope of providing a different context for reader reflection on intimacy.

I am strongly influenced by John Berryman's poetry. In *The Dream Songs*, his speaker Henry tends to move in and out of dreamlike conversations with himself in response to his waking reality. Berryman also manipulates syntax and verb tense in order to emphasize certain words or feelings in his poems. I imported this technique in quite a few of my poems. Arthur Rimbaud is another of my influences, although to less of a degree than Berryman. Rimbaud's flights of vision and dreams have been known to make me salivate. A final major literary influence on the work is Franz Kafka, although he is not known to have written poetry. Many of his shorter pieces, such as *The Wish to be a Red Indian*, affect my style with their employment of single images that fade into abstraction. Kafka defeats a concrete image by either immersing it in emotion or focusing on the absurdity of a single part of the image. This technique opens a piece to reader subjectification without fully revoking an understanding of the physical world.

"The fool looks in the lake,
sees a fire of colors
and drowns trying to pull
the flowers from the water."

-Matt Crow, from "The locust"

"But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing."

-John Berryman, from Dream Song "29"

My trampolinic earth

This is the way I was strung
but not tuned to play—this is the way
my world ends, spilled over my feet.
My eyes are closed
enough to star the light coming from the kitchen
and a lover's voice renders distant verdicts
in my ear. The earth bows beneath my trampled,
telephone-holding body and I am shot
up, my head bounced, screaming
with a gunpowder whine to boom
myself across the air and fade
into a spider-shaped cloud of smoke.
All being equal and transmission-dependent,
I make plans to find some gasoline,
soak myself, call back, and crackle
my last minutes into a melting receiver.

Some of how it happened

We wound ourselves
on the thinnest wire of what
we shared, some moment
in some afternoon when
we saw ourselves reflected
in each others' pupils. Some summer,
we said when we were
pleasantly high, wrapped in air
conditioning, watching the contractions come
in our eyes when the tree outside
lifted grey from the window.

But was she pretty
and I was later wronged, kicked out
of place and somewhat withered
from all the wind that escaped
surrounding mouths. And yes,
the air was heavy. And yes,
I recall being bent by what
she blew on my face. And yes,
there was always her warm body
to make the words slink
off my back. I lived with her
in my skin and I shot myself
with stories of a way to stop
breathing with her mouth
so close to mine. I was afraid
I would inhale her, that
my lungs would shape her.

Pretense of sleep and other things

A fan half-filled
the doorway, scattered
papers on the floor
slowly over night.

Your hands found
them stacked neatly
against the morning wall.
Your eyes crusted

in contrast to hers, she who
woke when you rolled over
and mumbled something
about crows at six.

She never hurt
for ways to lift herself over
you in those darker hours.
You pretended

that you did not feel
her stares and caught yawns
and she unfolded across
you. With slow, plantlike

precision, she put one foot
on the bedrail and left
warm sheets where she
had been. You feigned that you were

not awake enough to lie
in the small draft
created by her absence.
You listened to the sound

of the fan, muffled slightly
as she passed through
the living room door
to leave without waking.

During the flood

In an apartment by some trees,
a filled-in swimming pool, an overflowing
bayou, a patch of condemned
buildings, and a rusted
iron gate, we threw ourselves
on each other and later pushed our faces
against the plexiglass front window.
We watched the rain cover everything.
It made mud, smothered engines,
and leaked in slowly underneath
the air conditioner that broke
every three months. The wet heat
stood on our heads and shoved
our cheeks together.
I was never more dirty from her
or the air and the sweat we smeared
on each other might have been rain.
It crept from the concrete banks
of the bayou and patiently licked up
the street until we knew the day
was finished. After the sun
set, the apartment darkened
and we lit some candles. We soaked
ourselves in wine, listened to the poured
echoes in the rotting walls, and fell
on each other some more.

Head South

Northern cornfields stretch my eyes
yellow-gray clouds roll
over themselves and spit.

Behind winter I see nothing;
the sun disappears for more months
than it shines and the leaf-green
ground quickly decolors

to crunch under snowboots.
I find no reason not to believe
in the immortality of growing things—
a long death and sleep
before a short resurrection for harvest.

I am still not natural
like the fields—
I die once to feed the cycle.
Perhaps my dirt will find

some expectant mother who has not forgotten
where her people go,
who fills her mouth with me and screams,

stuffed, back at the land
and the life it hoards.

Dream

Friend gives me a framed sepia
toned picture of himself and someone
I hate. They stand in loose jeans,
hold each other. Cheap friend,
cheap frame. Picture fell out.
Another picture behind it. New picture—
one I don't remember trying to forget.
Person I hate with his lady on a car,
dogwood blooms on the hood. Holds
her hand like a new father.
She was thinner then, not expecting,
hadn't found me out
of a crowd on a University park bench.
Picture began to move, my eyes
the camera sweeping toward
their light couple conversation.
They shift on the hood. She tosses
her hair with expertise, plays
with her belt buckle, smiles
not for posterity but in the present.
As if she didn't know I was there.
Didn't know my name and face.
Wind blew us both
in a whirl of sound, sepia-tongued
voices lifted me away
from her, back to the body
where I lay half-warm beneath
sometimes-shared sheets,
waiting for her to forget
I said I was leaving.

Painfully allow me to digress

I know that some shape similar to mine haunted her head
 that night while I slept for three hours on the uncomfortable
 couch in that black Illinois town before I was to wake wild
 eyed and dry and throw myself over the rails
 of the train to a city of wind where I dragged my suitcase
 through piles of businessmen and beggars that were kind
 enough to point me in the direction of the tracks that led
 to the planes leaving for everywhere that I was obviously not
 going to since my ticket had the name of my home
 stamped boldly on its face that sat in a small paper envelope
 in my backpack along with the countless particles that made up
 my other belongings (two notebooks and some music) that I was
 taking to lay on the floor of my parents' house as I rode
 with my head against plastic windows that fogged my reflection
 with my own sleeping exhalations and I still wonder if I was talking
 in my sleep as I often do when I am dreaming of her
 excursions into bars and her rides in cars to her rooms
 full of marines eager to show off their scars and purchase every
 drink so I had another drink on the airplane from the sarcastic stewardess
 who asked for the rest of my money while I listened to the music
 of Idaho and thought about where I was going
 to tell her that it was completely over you know kaput and how I was going
 to hold my drink while I leered across the table and screamed
 harlot whore slut bitch at her pretty hair while my eyes asked her to help me
 forget what had happened when I left town in a moving van full
 of everything we christened with our naked midnight fumbblings to help me
 remember why the hell I still felt queasy and why I filled the toilet
 with bloody shit night after solitary night only to return
 home wanting to spend a few small moments in her
 presence but of course it didn't go that way when I entered
 that bar with its clouds of piss-smell and let her sob on my leg
 before I exacted my body from her hysterics
 to leave the bar and get drunk for days
 but I digress

Remember this tryst

Ghosts of each other,
they lay on the couch
collecting dust

in new afternoons.
Rays reflect on their faces
before they slip

on their shadow masks
and laugh to each other.
They skin each other

and lose the past
in the cushions,
so much change.

Soaked in smoke,
emptied in their minds,
they make silent

plans to find and haunt me,
kill my sleep.
They will not get away with it.

Limbs

Limbs

1

We sit safe in houses.
Worlds live away
through unseen eyes
and shuttered lids.
There are others that feel
the same as you, others
sputtering in smothered masks.

2

I consumed myself, beginning
with the tendons from my elbow.
They gave me too much
trouble and I ceased to love them
a few summers previous. I looked
at the place where my tricep ended.
I put some water on
to boil and my vision filled
with black steam; from the edges
came a slow-spattered fuzz.

3

On my lips the red year bursts
with a pulled dandelion scream
and it occurs to me that I am tired
of watching these bodies pile
through the doors and days.

4

I am the ghost of Genghis Khan,
shaking my invisible self
on your living room floor,
bending my legs in odd angles
while I stand between your faces
and the television. Tom Brokaw
has nothing on my millions
of scars and furrowed beard.

Generic lament

I tell myself that these times
will eventually pass. I will be breathing
beneath another sky or building.
But the muster builds from inside
on this occasion when I consider
my broken body and wish for
a method to remove past
days from my mind—a method
that would somehow seal
these minutes and hours in a box
to be put far from feet, under my bed.
The days grow teeth and lumber
into thick fog, collecting pieces
as they go, stealing my senses,
fixing the future with augmented frames
and signposts. There will never be another way
to think, a new filter of figment,
a clear glass to lay in a clean pane.
I have watched the dust pile and pile
on every stiffened friendship, each morning sun,
every brushed yellow tooth, every car door
I open, every jamb I pass beneath,
every place I revisit
in new clothes and faces.

Green mind

I do not eat because I am
not hungry for anything.
I would rather put flowers in my mouth
and hold them like a doctor's wooden stick.
I would rather my breath
around the petals and the stems
than have it go bad like after a long night
of sleeping. I would rather fall
face forward into the next room
with lilies spilling from my teeth
and goldenrod crushed beneath my feet.
I would love to lean against the wall,
close my eyes while I salivate
the leaves and drool down my chin.
It is not that I am fasting
or that I espouse some beautiful new diet;
in fact I would prefer to remain anonymous
with my flowers in my mouth.

Heavy yokes and what-have-you

A large, unfeathered hatchling,
 I wandered as smoke through the clucks
 and pecks on the parking lot, wearing
 my shorts and a t-shirt with a picture
 of the back of a shaved head on it.
 The world was a runway and the people
 with whom I had been jogging were nowhere
 to be seen. My head was not shaved
 and my legs were somewhat skinny,
 bent the wrong way among gulls
 who poked their heads in stop motion
 toward me. The background stadium
 lifted up the sky and my gaze.
 Cars passed, passed behind. I pushed stop
 on my portable player. Birds,
 cars with black eyes faded into outlined trees
 and I was filled with the God of morning twilight,
 red-eyed showers and coffee left steaming on the counter.
 Worldless and of the air, nestless, I was fashioned
 of my own breath. A silver-tipped front, forecast
 by beheaded voices, rolled over the earth
 enough to shadow the top of the stadium. I shut
 my eyes in its wind, lifted my legs quicker,
 quicker through the mediated air and was swept
 through a flapping cloud, thrumming in the rushed
 escape of gulls. As the front quaked its clouds
 above me, I opened my eyes
 in a shadow of grey water. First drops fell
 on my head as the birds became dots
 and I remembered where I was
 previously headed.

Poem for poems

Perhaps if I were to write about pretty things
 and food and voluptuous words and incite pleasure
 like a riot of the mind. Perhaps if I were to talk
 about myself some more perhaps if I were
 to talk about time some more time
 and children and adults and life/death,
 consequential crap, etc. Perhaps if I were to walk the world
 with unbelievable insight and immeasurable breadth
 of vision. Perhaps if I were to stop this bleeding
 with more than two-ply toilet paper and put the knife
 away put the knife in a back pocket.
 Perhaps if I were to decide that the knife
 was merely a reflection of my father
 or my mother or the evil genius of (insert demographic:
 race, class, gender, etc.). Perhaps if I was certain
 the world was kept spinning on a me string

Perhaps if I were the wind, moving in an empty body,
 mostly empty space, empty and swept
 over spaces with cleanliness in my wake,
 invisible water, and perhaps if I had currents
 from my lungs and these added to my breadth
 of vision (I would encompass, I would wrap myself
 around the planet, all).
 Perhaps if I were to talk with an impressive command
 in my voice and so there would be no more of this
 perhaps crap. Perhaps if I were to sack and give myself
 away, full of nothing like a Poet
 Who-I-Can't-Remember's sacks of wind.

How to feel better about being left alone
for my sentimental friends

How it started: my legs
 were going to leave me
 along with my favorite pair of shoes.
 True story. Cut them off with a chainsaw,
 left the body grinning in the bathtub.
 Didn't leave the head either—
 put it in a sack and went wandering.

Caught my Soul with a fishing pole,
 various naked meanderings about the coast
 of the Sea of Love. Used my bloody skull
 to do it with. The Soul can sniff blood in the water,
 like a shark, although it is composed
 of less cartilage and more air.

Held it up and thought
 about throwing it back.
 Decided to fry it on the spot
 after pulling my head
 from its jaws. No better meal
 than a side of your own scalp
 with butter-sauced Soul. No,
 that's not really true.
 Didn't eat my Soul

all at once, saved some of it
 in the freezer with pieces of my leg.
 No, not true either. Fact is I'm not sure
 what happened the night I found the legs
 out. Went into what some fictionists
 call a blind rage. Found myself seated in a chair,
 in a room, staring at a nothing
 wall. Never felt worse. End passed me by.
 Legs took leave. Expected more of me.

Dream

My two grandmothers were unearthed
and set beside the kitchen table
in the night. The air between them was morning
and the sun lit their hair
with orange. I began to sing.
My body expanded with breath enough
to near the walls. The bodies
began to shake in a rising gale,
my wind, my body now more than skin.
I lifted shingles to the sky
with my voice and tore clouds
from the day's scrim. The bodies
were caught in my cone, torn apart
to scatter, sparks in the air. Grown
to the heavens, I squinted in the sun.
Mouth, breath all psalm. I was the rushing
current bloodied in all things,
a gale that swam in every lung.

Lit in the head

I woke from a nap and felt a year's
dust rush from behind the box fan
over my lips. I was rapt
in the love of false mornings;
the clock said seven and I didn't see
that it was merely evening. The night
had yet to pass and then I was awake
with my feet on soft carpet and my eyes
caught the light in the living room
doorway. Some angel must have come
while I was sleeping, some deitic hand
had seized my burning mind
with a carpenter's precision, pausing
only to scratch my cat's ears
before it mingled with heavy air
and disappeared into walls. I walked through
the lights and the air to the living room
rug, where I fell crying with my hands
in my beard, my knees on my shoulders.

Limbs

Limbs

5

The fields are organless and inside
 out, always yellow, waving in air
 at our foreheads when we pass
 in cars or when we climb
 ditch embankments to see them recede
 from the sky. The fields ruffle their own shadows
 and go gray in our approach.

6

Now I sleep with ghosts around
 me. They complain about their missing
 parts, some heads and hands, some ears
 and fingers. They wrap themselves
 in the walls and steal along my baseboard
 with whispered secrets about my personal
 hygiene habits. I wonder whether
 they get bored, what with my daily labors
 and my leagues of passing mourners.
 There are enough of them
 to account for each of my visitors twice,
 one on each arm as they slip
 beneath the door jamb. They drape themselves,
 invisible silk on faces of friends.

7

When you plan to bury me,
 find train tracks, ignore signs,
 place me in a metal box
 and stomp on its lid
 until I am neatly wedged
 between the rails.

Dream

Through a familiar closet
door and back into my old room
I glide in the blue light
that slips off painted walls.
Dusted air of toys and picture
books of Presidents. Tossed sheets
on the floor. Dreaming child
with my name. Sleeps in waves
and almost wakes when I near
with raking limbs for arms,
scaled violet skin,
hollow-cheeked grin,
teeth. Fanning out
and leaning over the shifting child,
I slowly place my hands
over his head to tighten, mask
him in black twig fingers,
exhale as he strikes at open air
and collapses on the mattress.

Night out

Made himself a mirror
in water on the table,
head in the periphery,
face silhouetted in the wet black.

Hands brushed his back, apparitions
spread around damp napkins
on the table. Reflections grew heads
and lost them.

Drunken breath rained; hair dewed
with desperation. Shadows devoured
each other on the table. People rubbing
people in the dark.

Wandered home alone, swam
through his head. Woke red-eyed
from the pools, hands on nothing
but bed and an empty stomach.

All the liquor

It was as though I walked into fog
with nothing on. My mother
would have scolded me, bought me
a sweater or something. All the faces,
all the mouths, around me
all the dreams and fictions slowly chiseled
from air. Weren't supposed to find out—
I hid the body where I wouldn't find it
and vaped myself in various directions.
No map. Not even a taxi. No address.

Followed me, though, stuck to space
between my shoulderblades. I hid from it
inside wombs and bottles and broken friends,
hid because I wanted to, because I wanted to watch
suicide and leave the body
where it belonged. Some swatch of earth away.

The boy breaks within the body

Hands set fire to his mouth, his eyes.
His arms swing in blown flame,
his skin crispy. A shell,
he wanders in reflection,
dead, dying, or pre-empted.
I laugh at him in car doors, half-guzzled
glasses, puddles and pools, screens
and screens and screens. He peels
away easily now, a mild sunburn
or skinned elbow presents no greater
problem. His eyes watch me as he darkens
slowly over night, every shift
tears or pokes and fills our vision
with static gray, every moment
is engraved between us.
We separate somewhat smoothly,
the tendons already cut, the only sound
a soft ripping. He reminds me of worn velcro,
all ground teeth and broken loops, empty-mouthed
in his mimicry, almost muted as our shadows drip
away and we are somehow free to wake
in foreign lives.

Come on, die young

We were full of funnel cakes
and fourteen years, she in striped tights
and I in a band t-shirt. She followed
me for several hours, always behind
a column or trash can when I turned,
always a few riders between us in line.
Would see her shoe disappear
around a corner. Fleeting hair in the wind.

My friends thought she was looking
at them, nudges and boy laughs
in the arcade. And her friend
was cute. We pushed each other
into things, went into the theater,
laid on the ground and yelled foul things
amid fathers and daughters and mothers
who pretended not to notice. We were large
in our non-approach, we knew
she was watching.

Found her sitting on the promenade,
pretending to fiddle with a plastic glowflower,
by herself in a fireworked night.
The day had long dripped from her body
and her hair hid her eyes
while I struggled to say something
smooth. She saw my shoes
and her back arched in a smile
as she stood and slouched her hips toward me.

Remembered my name
and she told me hers as we left the park
several minutes before closing. Was looking
for a place to take her and she was still occupied
with her hands. A bush looked good enough.
Pulled her behind it where we talked
about music and our parents and where we went to school
and then we kissed.

Gave her anything I could get off the ground
on the short walk to where parents waited.
Climbed a tree and found my friends in the crowd
made some introductions
one friend talked to hers.

Of course I called her as soon as I got home

and her father took the phone away. Always did.
Still found each other anyway,
always at some gathering of youth,
maybe the concert where I was dancing—
her hand on my shoulder from a faceless mass—
or when I sneaked her onto the floor
at the local arena, or when I was atop
a lightpole in a crowd between bands
several years later—

She wandered up, stoned and grinning, and I slid
from the metal into her arms, her hair,
her eyes, the heat of the day and we flew
from everyone to some bushes or hidden spot
where we talked and laughed and touched
and tongued and made plans for escape.
When I was old enough, we left
a field extravaganza to the dismay of her friends
and went to a cheap hotel where we drank
and drank and made out in the shower.
Passed out to find her staring at me
in the morning, smacking gum
that she put in my mouth with hers.
We fumbled through each other
before we parted, all smiles and promises
to return to growing up apart,
to spin ourselves in separate, little lives.

Hope she's still lonely

Newly sixteen, on the phone
at three am with another one
of the girls I gave my youth to.
Friend smiles next to his girlfriend
on the bed. He found her
at a drive-in, where she wore
tight pants and was largely tipped
by factory men coming
home in the chemical air they created.

Drunk, wonderfully drunk, and this girl
is telling me she won't take me back.
Still drinking, though, still talking
while my friend reaches for another
beer and balances the girl on a knee.

In the morning, he told me I took the phone
inside the closet, dragging a twelve-pack,
mumbling something about
being better than a seventeen year old
jackass with lots of pot and a fast car.
Told me I came out later
with my arms aloft, happy to be taken
back, and collapsed on the bed.
Called her when my head felt right, for three days
of conversations before she flew
from my voice into a clouded car door.

Jackass

Thought my cat was gone.
 Turned around and saw no hide
 laying fur on parts of my apartment.
 Thought I had gone with him,
 head didn't feel much the same
 and I was sitting empty
 on a bedsheet then a barstool
 with a runny mouth and plenty
 of ears pointed at me. Eyes were saying sorry
 when I told them. No cat. Sad. More whiskey.
 Sometimes free. Waitress had a cat.
 Wasn't the whole thing just horrible,
 we all agreed yeah and I was told
 not to dwell on it long. More to do
 than worry about jackass cat out in the snow
 making free with meows and scratching
 up the neighbors' porches. He'd be back
 where the food was. I didn't think so.
 We were too much alike. He'd have stepped out
 in a blue rush of life, followed his whiskers
 off to break down the street and bust out
 from what he thought of that tiny place.
 Hands everywhere, new food, some shiny tabby
 waiting for him behind the next mailbox.
 I had it right. No cat. More whiskey. Jackass.
 Hoped he was happy now with his smiling owners
 and a big plush bed with some foreign name
 hung in gold banners all over the place. He'd be purring.
 Wandered all over the neighborhood
 on the way home, calling
 for him, making tch-tch with my labored tongue.
 Thought about when I got him from his mother.
 Put him in a box in the car. Sang to him all the way home.
 Didn't shut up with the crying. Probably missed
 those other warm cats. He was the runt. Stepped through
 the door, found him in the kitchen when I got home.
 Twitched his tail all over my legs. Got a weird look
 on his face when I scooped him
 over my head and out into the parking lot. Lots of whooping,
 I showed him to the neighbors and everyone
 was pleased. Still don't know where he'd been
 hiding, some invisible cat place probably.

So I met this girl

& we are gorgeous and running together
from ourselves with these night messages
sometimes phone sometimes computer
where I listen to jazz & make a model of contrivance
in my jogging pants and Dexter Gordon look
on my face at the monitor. There has never been
a way to erase the thousand miles that sits between
here & home like a gallon bucket of lead
on my body. She is fall-over
beautiful, her legs stretch for stories
between my shoulders and feet. She prints
my poems, carries them with her, says she reads
them over again like murder & the way
I read her letters over, over meals, the desk
at work, the cat on my lap. Her letters
say so, but there are arrows by her text
& I know she deletes,
adds here, there with the hand
that grazed my skin so lightly only days ago
before I left. Nothing better about her
than her words (& her)
so carefully chosen, so fashioned,
so flowed evenly into my head, my sleep
& the days that lift their fog
& the space between my sheets.

Speechless, drifted, should have said

We sat in a car outside my parents' house
with a couple of cigarettes
and some empty bottles, talking
about girls and music, things that were
important. He said something
I'd forget by morning, but I remember
his delivery, punctuated with coughs
and exaggerated pulls on the filter
of what was left of his tobacco.

I was nodding
off between the beats
of the discs he slipped in the player
and I caught snatches of some dream,
mostly the soundtrack. I suppose it made us
friends, my falling asleep in his car,
his not caring, his continuance
of the conversation. I didn't feel bad
for not listening—these were the same things
we'd chewed over every night
and he knew what I would have said.

Sometimes I wish I was
more present when we were
talking like that—I always fell
asleep at the wrong moments,
usually in driveways or living room chairs.

Always languored outside the minute,
leaning my head against something,
I'd wonder where the birds went at night.
Probably a telephone wire somewhere.
They'd be raking their talons
on the rubber casing, tensely twittering
over the pulses of a thousand words per second.

Dreams of laughing with my grandmother
while we were on the phone
together; we'd lie and blame static
on hordes of claws.

Statues

Met her through a friend—
his girlfriend's friend. Never met a girl
so delicious, full of drugs.
Had a red light in her room, Mother
hated her on sight. Not my first lover,
my first loved. Thought I was
smitten before the act, buried in her
voice. Was right—I was always bursting
in her life, following my palms and dialing,
dialing whatever number her voice lay
at the end of. She waited for me
by classroom doors and lockers,
watched me across lunchroom tables.

Conspired to take her
beneath the red light, friend
helped me—convinced her friend
to go along. We walked from school,
they smoked. Made it
to the door and the floor
with some music playing
over our heads. Friend changed
the music and made two
headed shadows on the wall.

She tasted like tar and cola
as I mouthed her clean.
My hands never left
my side—shook like chained dogs
while we kissed and rubbed
our foreheads together over hours.
Expected her to crawl away

when I released my hands—Mother
said girls were statues left
in glass museums. Couldn't hold—
she smiled, mumbled something
about how slowly I moved,
put her hand over mine
on her chest. I prayed for days.

In the wake

There is something watching over stares
that cover inches and something watching

beneath her canopy of hair, something watching
over sleeping manboys and womangirls

together watching titans in the woodgrained walls.
There is a goddess between her legs

and the rest of the world. There is a goddess between her
and the sheets. There is a holy emptiness

in the untouched air on the corners of the bed.
There are gods and goddesses of skin

left prickling alive in the wake,
drafts blown cold over glistening bodies.

Limbs

Limbs

8

Athena in the afternoon
and Aphrodite at the apex of midnight, she

9

She flickered into shape outside
my window, cold, wanting for less
wind, looking starved for
someone, although rays shot from her hand
into the glass and I was old enough
to know better. Old enough to slide
across my bed and palm the windowpane,
to watch her mouth slip
sentences into breeze
as though they could shatter
and find my forgotten ears. I let my eyes roll
across the floor and couldn't find my body.

10

I will compare it to a pet.
When I leave, it has two options:

11

Worlds are killing friends
of mine and I am smothered
as of late. The streetlights swell
for all of us, we falter in the slightest light
harshened in starred eyes. Buildings
control the sky, always falling
and we crouch and crouch and cover
our heads and our ears and our eyes
and wait to feel the world
on our backs, finally a promised
weight and rotted breath.
When it comes, we are surprised
and we shout to ourselves
and we drink and we drink
and we take some pills
and we talk to professionals
and we shudder and we strain
to wrap our heads around it.

She loves in mirrors

Had been privy to
her since my own adult inception,
her acolyte, invented newly
with the passings
of her frequent head
before the windowpane.
Would swallow
my voice and fall into her
with room and mind to spare.
She was darker—fevers rained
from her pupils, rolled from
the tips of her hanging hair
to catch circles of my neck..
Stroked her curved surfaces
and felt the pulse in my own
fingers, a satisfaction
of smothered wants and passages driven
in less energetic throwings
at her. Here was blood, the body,
fountain and idol
I couldn't spirit my face from.

Hung with the purse

Smiling as they found each other,
 fast-wrapped in a hug.
 They met too quickly. My foot slipped
 on its way around them. I found myself
 holding her purse and his drink
 again, holding them
 a little too long. Sweating leather
 strap in my left and melting liquor
 in my right while they exchanged more
 than pleasantries. Before she released and whirled
 for her bag, he whispered
 something to her. Air between
 them winked.

Drove her to my apartment, let her
 cradle my wrists while she upbraided
 my stupidity for making such an accusation.
 She had chosen
 only me and felt cheapened when
 I brought it up, we were to be married,
 after all. Friends wouldn't do that
 to their friends he said sometimes
 when it was he and I drinking.
 Shoulder bruised from claps on the back
 in the wake of another ordered round. I knew
 there were times when I came
 home to an unhooked phone
 and his name on her dreaming lips.

Always their extra second for arms
 on each other. Always his drunken pledges
 to take her on a friendly
 date after I left town. Just to keep her
 faithful he would say and then wink
 at one of us. Impossible to tell
 which—she stood too close to me
 and I was hung with the purse anyway.

Dream

She disturbs the curtains
in the living room. Hear her
from the kitchen while I trace
grooves in the table with my little finger.
Sounds leave her mouth to linger
under the doorway before they slide
off the side of my head, thin balloons.
Says something about a neighbor,
a good neighbor, neighbor with a nice
garden and a hat.

Walls become brick and I am outside,
watching a gate swing open. Backyard
sparkles with green and spotted yellow.
Hatted man by the back fence
reaches into a plastic pot
on the porch, greets me
by waving at his garden
of weeds planted in shapes of letters.

Calls me closer to shove
me at the garden, drops dust
over my head. Yard shoots up,
loud colors. Body shrinks to a stem,
my feet fall into earth.
Casting cut shadows on clipped grass,
my leaves shine, spiny curls in bright sun.

Haunts my sleep

heavy days spent waiting
for those moments with her
to fall over into
something what

{not valium, what it ends
in always}

heavy days spent pretending
to be unconcerned, with two eyes
directed at the walls, following
the usual printings on the wall

{not valium, what
she always
wanted}—should

have never ended
(baby)
above her legs,
all those mornings heaved
to the side with fluid motions
her lips and hips
were a mountain by the toilet

impossible to shower in those
conditions, nervous
complaint, nervous condition

{valium, what
with trying to forget it
all, you know}empty-

wombed, she would shoot herself
up with men in various
rented rooms to varieties of music
and decorate those scenes with her
frantic timing and murmured
complaints about the conditions

{always the conditions, nervous,
what, valium spilled
from a tilted hand
that held the bottle}

Limbs

Limbs

12

The shielded shards of our replacements
 decorate the pedestals and the floor
 in our wake, our slithered burst
 of wind and airy arms
 that met them with the fever
 of an orgasmic god.

13

Knife in the hand.
 Blood in the head.
 Blood in the head.

14

Delivering the last shot to her head, I
 coughed and found blood in my fist
 before the sidewalk lurched
 to meet my face. Feathers
 in my ears, all over the pavement
 —black, striped, curling through
 my fingers. I was no better than a body
 laid tangled on another and the curb.
 She was blown through, a thousand
 torn mouths in a bedsheet.

15

I am quickly covered in livers, and I smile while I wipe
 the bile and blood from my eyes. I am happy
 in an organic sense, if you will forgive the pun.
 I am prone upon a bed of flowering stomachs and watching you
 with the most seductive of gazes, although I mean nothing
 by it. I am fortunately one
 of the undead, fortunately one of the wedded
 casualties and I need to feel
 I could breathe clearly without these muscles and nervous
 systems slung over my arms, wrapped
 around my legs, trestled on my head.

After failing to conceive

She falls down stairs in my dreams,
kicks her face with one high
heel. Blood smokes the carpet.
Her hands hold red stems and quiver.

She lies in twisted little things,
pieces of her hair. Threads
of her dress curl like baby
spiders on their backs.

Lying next to her glass eyes,
I watch her red mouth bubble and form
muted questions in the short
space between us.

Autophobia and murderous intentions

I am better at killing
 with my right hand than what
 this document might have to say:
 you never listen to the left
 hand; it talks to the right when
 you are sleeping and sends nothing
 but gloved silence beneath the sleeves
 of your coated conscience in the piles of fresh
 snow or blood [it really doesn't matter which, I heard
 my thumb whispering in my ear last night -- it thinks
 it can affect my dreams by asking simple questions and making
 several statements about the meaning(s) of life, the blind leading
 the blind across miles of parqueted floors, a blade that pathetically drives
 itself into the wall as it passes from palm to palm with fingertipped precision,
 and much much sweat left inside the gloves to mingle with those few drops and drips
 of what (you wake much too soon, always with the hands clutching pillows or perhaps
 your nervous legs which do nothing to point out the culprit, the enemies of the mind,
 those fingered companions that take slow liberties with the physical objects
 in your apartment and remove themselves only to flicker the light switch, most likely
 grinning at each other in your ignorance, they have more than half-lives they will say
 when your eyes are closed and other portions of your brain have taken it upon themselves
 to run the riggings of supposed light and sound and parades of subliminal stimulation,
 festivals
 with crowds of faces that you yourself might have followed in other times, lives, ways,
 and implicit
 dissensions that seem completely out of grasp only because the ten-fingers will not take it upon
 themselves to fight
 without your supposed permission; they cower from cigar clippers and mallets that I have
 threatened them with what
 purpose other than regaining some semblance of control, some shading of order and a general
 eschewing of dust from every shelf
 in my apartment, things shall not get so dirty and red from their armed escapades in the softer
 hours of the stars I always tell them when I am
 scrubbing and the sun appears on my sallowness through the kitchen window and I squint at my
 hands, my pale, specked hands, their bloodlust can but will
 not leave my dreams any more I said in unison with my reflection as I stepped from the red
 shower with no other intention than that of having them removed
 by a professional)]-- such are my nights and days, and I caution all
 owners of benign hands to take care in the presences of palmists—
 they're in it together.

Enough to kill a horse

Doubled over her face,
I could almost hear her scream
when the fluid in the motion caught
up with my maker arm.
The ceiling corners held my eyes
and my jaw went slack
in some purple off the mattress.
I thought she was left smiling
closer to her ears, her mouth cut
too many times through the unlit
space between us.

Thinning over this

Felt her breath in the field
as I buried her body of humid years
passed in the space between boy and what
I thought was something new.
Hair fell off itself
and flickered against my scalp
in the breeze. Hands left
the shovel in the ground
and my foot sagged on its ridge.
Smelled the ghost of her cigarette
and her chocolate tongue
around me. Kept digging
beside the body, kicked it—
good measure. Felt her yawn
and swallow in my brain
as I rolled her over
the edge,
covered her,
and tried to leave.

Coupling

The short span after dark, we wait
for our bodies to turn to stone in the sun-caked
mud with our arms around us. Run our tongues
over the ravines in our foreheads, taste salt, and our fingers
stick briefly in our hair. Already learned to lick our eyelids
into shape and gain another day. Already learned to touch
slowly so there will only be light
bruises. Drain our heads
with some idle conversation about the dirt,
the dark around.

Nothing has changed
in the earth above, cracked and blown over.
Hair seems to grow—it is our skulls
that shrink, our bodies that turn
in the stale air. There are times, however,
when we shiver off our shoulders,
stand out of our legs and climb those
several feet to give ourselves to wind—
we crumple and join above the dirt.

Limbs

Limbs

16

You smell like rickets
 and I can't wrap myself around myself
 or you. I can't breathe, being wind
 and stretched over the abscesses of the days spent
 fumbling in the corner with your memory
 hanging over my head. I am still
 moving the refugees of trash on the floor
 in snakelike patterns and wondering where
 I left my body, where I left my head,
 where this room was left by, where I left
 and lied about it, where I turned inside out
 to find the space I was full of.

17

Dust sits on the blinds.
 They have not been re-cracked
 for a year. They were left
 in a half-lurch, an angle pointed
 at the ground that shatters sunrays
 on the old carpet and my feet.
 I have left fingerprints in the dust
 however, when I watched the students
 walk to school, or when I watched
 the trash people pick up the trash.
 I have worn the same blue bathrobe
 for fifty showers, and I only shower
 when I have slept
 longer than a few hours at a time.

18

I come with a face full
 of black teeth on some lanky doorstep.
 I come with a hand full
 of rotten posies that pressed
 my skin to tear.
 I come with a head full
 of malformed babies, of glass stuck bleeding
 in clots of hair, of love split
 down my repetitive spine.
 I come with no one else.

Congregation

We are happy to allow your entrance
and swirl your face with ours—
we are not worried about your story
or your center. We will find a center in you.

If you leave, no other
will take your place. You are part
of our community. The chair will stay
empty but your spirit will stay behind.

Should you need it again, return
to us and we will remind you
how you became a piece
of us, how you never left at all.

The Pastor speaks

They look so pretty
on their knees before the body
transfigured, flesh made
brilliant in stained
glass rays.

They shear themselves of sin with bent
heads, closed eyes, folded hands,
cramped knees squirming on the narrow,
carpeted rails. I am still feeding
them of the body, although I help no one
lift the cup. I can't.

They would leave with blood
on their doiled chests, crumpling
their hats in the tight sweat
of their hands. I should not want
to create a scene. I should not want
to take up the crook again. I should
not want to want them to want
the body like this, not the body falling
from my hands, not the broken body.

The Pastor prays

Lord, it is not that I drink
too much. Lord, the drinks
cost too much and don't stay full.
Lord, my shoes have worn themselves
away in your mud and snow,
have molded my feet
into scythes that stumble in
and out of bright mornings
in the bathroom with my arms
making bent crosses on my belly.
Lord, it is that I do not drink
enough of your fine grain whiskey,
it is that I do not get enough
of your shaping hands.
I know I do not get enough
because I know that you are
still thinning my drinks as I ask
for more. Lord,
it is hard to accept direction
when I am not soaked in charcoal
mellowed bourbon; I stare myself sober
by paging through those memories
you were so thoughtful
to endow me with.

Congregation

Our Sundays are slow—
we squirm beneath him
for an hour or two and spill
into the narthex to talk

about our people. We are proud
of our church
families that only spread
beneath his thumb.

He would have our lives written
between lines of the good
book. Our faith is a force
in the community, our young people

are strong and athletic.
They do not wear dark clothing,
too much make-up. They do not worship
Satans, drink, smoke, sex. Surely

they will carry us to the new age.
The end demands that we coach them—
we want them next to us
when we are dead.

The Pastor speaks

"The Lord bless
you and keep you,
The Lord make his face
to shine upon
you and give you
peace." They are through
shifting in their seats
and fumbling with their white
bags. Picking up their feet
and filing out the door,
they are not slow to make
their Sundays. Barbeques,
lawn mowing, football,
gossip in the narthex
or over the phone.
In my car, I have a brand new bottle
and no one to share it with. The church
secretaries would, I think—
they smile behind plastic flowers.
My Sundays are far from slow,
I drive to a bar in another town
and wait for God to coalesce
in the bottom of my glass.

Congregation

We watch him die
a less magnificent death—
no scarlet thunder calling,
no wonderful suicides

to see in the neighborhood.
We watch him die
in the crevice of his own mind,
planted in broken days

he expected to arrive.
He should float off
in a burning casket, with all of us
watching from our homes

and windowpanes. Nothing is gained
from his slow death by bourbon.
Wish we could forgive him
the drink, all being ash.

He defends himself, says secrets
to his shrink about watching his reflection
crack, something about his eyes
and our herding gaze.

The Pastor prays

Give me no sleepless
nights and a stomach
that stays down. Send me reeling
in a fortunate fiction
of love. Torture me
no more. Let me see
the full length of the mirror.
Wash me in unbottled
holies and more than temporary
solace. Grant me these things
before I break, Lord.
Sirens sing from alleyways,
voices call nightly
to drag me into windowless places
and lay me next to walls.
I shake in forests of glass
and labels when I wake,
my hands stutter
and tear your pages.

Congregation

His red eyes crack
as he invokes the Host
and flails behind the pulpit
over Hell, brimstone rains, cities left

in desert. Says the Rapture
is a fire to be coughed from
the mind with prayers and sips
from the bloody cup.

Feeling charred, we sit,
holding hymnals, paging through
the program. The end must be
near, the end is an unbroken promise.

No one finds those golden streets
without repenting beneath his shaking
stares and fingers. We promise
to be good, please we promise.